

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 199 706

CS 206 163

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TITLE Audience-Based Composition: The Freshman Writer and the Professional Journalist.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (32nd, Dallas, TX, March 26-28, 1981).
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; College Freshmen; Higher Education; *News Reporting; Student Reaction; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Research; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness; News Reporters; *Revision (Written Composition)

ABSTRACT

If the measure of success in nonfiction prose writing is the writer's ability to communicate whatever it is he or she wishes to communicate, the purpose in writing must be defined with reference to the reader. Papers produced for freshman composition courses frequently show that students do not anticipate an audience. Information about audience constraints of professional writers may help design writing tasks and evaluation procedures to encourage students to take a more professional attitude toward their writing. Of all professional writers, journalists seem to come closest to student writers because they operate under similar constraints. To discover how news reporters are affected by audience constraints, reporters were asked to prepare protocols while they wrote actual stories for publication. The reporters were then interviewed about the organization, syntax, and diction they used in various versions of the story. Students were also asked to record either on tape or in the margins of their papers the reasons for any changes made as they drafted and revised. A comparison of responses revealed that journalists thought of the audience and reader more than did the college freshmen. Until courses can be designed to give students audiences in addition to the grader/teacher, they will not be able to write for others. (HOD)

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Audience-Based Composition: The Freshman
Writer and the Professional Journalist

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If the measure of success in non-fiction prose writing is the writer's ability to communicate whatever it is he or she wishes to communicate, the purpose in writing must be defined with reference to the reader. And as communication with the reader is always indirect, the writer must invent, imagine or create--consciously or unconsciously--that reader. The papers produced for freshman composition courses frequently show that students do not anticipate an audience. They do not think in terms of someone reading their papers.

When we try to give students a sense of audience, we often say things like the professional writer (or even the good writer) is always aware of the reader over his shoulder. But obviously, even professional writers cannot always be concerned about the reader. Not directly, at any rate. We know from studies like those done by Linda Flower and John Hayes and research done by Lee Odell and Charles Cooper that there are other concerns--for instance, the topic or sound. We also know that good writers refer to their audience much more often as they are writing or revising than do poor writers.

Students are well aware that at least one person will read their work--a teacher. In most classrooms, student essays are exercises designed to be corrected by a teacher. Perhaps because of this students frequently learn to assume

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that audiences are hostile people with red pencils who care more about grammatical correctness, organization, or exposition of the subject than they do about communication. Wayne Booth called this attitude the pedant's stance. He defined it as "ignoring or underplaying the personal relationship of speaker and audience and depending entirely on statements about a subject--that is, the notion of a job to be done for a particular audience is left out." Students who realize that non-standard grammar and punctuation affect readers negatively-- that they provide a poor impression of the writer as competent and credible--are more likely to work harder to master the conventions of written English.

Information about audience constraints of professional writers may help us design writing tasks and evaluation procedures to encourage students to take a more professional attitude toward their writing. Of all professional writers, newspaper journalists seem to come closest to student writers because they operate under similar constraints.

Although practices vary widely on contemporary newspapers, some broad and oversimplified generalizations may be made about how journalists come to write the stories they do. I assume that everyone knows something about how newspapers operate, even if it is information gathered from watching Lou Grant on TV.

What you see little of on Lou Grant are the exigencies faced by actual reporters. Reporters often receive assign-

ments about which they know nothing. They are often not trained in the specific field to which they are assigned. They must meet deadlines determined by the editor, the story itself, and publication times. There is often little time to write drafts and rewrite until the writer is personally satisfied. In many ways, students experience the same problems. Like journalists', students' time is limited by deadlines set by instructors. Like journalists, students may not know much about the topic for an assigned paper. Unlike journalists, of course, students have no city or copy editor to correct lapses in grammar or structure, and students are not experienced professional writers with college diplomas. But there are further parallels besides the exigencies.

Of the many types of newspaper articles, four parallel typical student assignments in aim: hard news and news features, persuasive editorials, and some personal columns. Roman Jakobson's conceptual framework for the aims of discourse provides the suggested parallels to student writing. Expository essays and news or news feature stories generally focus on the topic of discourse; argument essays and persuasive editorials tend to focus the writing task more on the reader; and self-expressive papers and some personal columns tend to call attention to the writers or their persona. The primary aims of these three kinds of writing--though, of course, none occurs as a pure type--are informative, persuasive, and expressive.

I would like to concentrate on writing with an informative aim today. Naturally organization of student papers and newspaper articles are far different despite their similarity in aim. A student writing an informative essay for a composition course cannot use the rigid format of a news story despite the fact that both the student essay and the news story are designed to inform. The inverted pyramid format of the news story functions to provide as many facts as possible in the least amount of space. The facts are ordered by their recency, immediacy, importance, or the likelihood of local interest. Transitions between paragraphs are minimal (not because the newswriter is egocentric in Shaughnessy's terms, but because of journalistic conventions), and paragraph length is usually determined by visual rather than structural criteria. An essay states or implies a thesis or, at least, a statement of intent. A news story or a news feature usually does not. News is its purpose and the statement of intent is implied simply by the fact that it is news. An essay with a referential aim can be written in any of the four modes of discourse defined by James Kinneavy; it can be a narration, a description, a classification, or an evaluation. A journalist writing a straight news story does not have these options, and the news feature writer is normally limited to the first three.

The journalist also has a constraint the student writer does not have--space. Although many students are given guidelines to length--the 500 word theme, for example--it is highly

unlikely that someone reading the paper will count the number of words. (Some students evidently believe teachers count words as is shown by the tiny erased numbers I've seen in margins.) A journalist sometimes knows how large a hole, how many lines of print, he or she can use for a particular story. The dictum "keep it short" is often heard in the city rooms of daily papers. More often though, the story itself, the practice of the particular paper and the precedent set by previous articles determine the length of a story.

To discover how news journalists are affected by audience constraints, I applied several techniques. I first asked writers to prepare protocols like those analyzed by Linda Flower and John Hayes while they wrote actual stories for publication. However, most reporters were reluctant to record, on tape, their thoughts while writing. I suspect they were embarrassed--the public city room is hardly a place where one would wish to be seen talking to oneself. However, the reporters participating in this study had an advantage writers studied previously had not. They composed at VDTs, computer visual display terminals which allow them to write nearly as quickly as they can speak. Reporters preferred to switch into the notes mode on the computers to record what they were thinking as they wrote. These notes and the accompanying stories were printed into hard copy for analysis, and the reporters were interviewed about the organization, syntax and diction they used in various versions of the

of the story.

Students, unfortunately, do not write on VDTs. Consequently, a slightly different method was used to elicit information about their concepts of audience. Students were asked to record either on tape or in the margins of their papers the reasons for any changes they made as they drafted and revised. All of the students were interviewed as were the reporters. Students wrote about the same topic and were told that the aim of the essay was to inform.

There are obvious weaknesses in this methodology. Students and reporters did not write about the same topic, and information about their writing was not gathered in exactly the same manner. One of the strengths of this method, however, is that it captures what writers think they are doing in an actual writing task rather than on invented for the study.

Thirty-three students, 15 first-quarter freshman composition students and 18 second-quarter students, participated in the study. They were selected simply by enrolling or being enrolled by the computer in the sections of freshman English I taught last year. All sophomores or upperclassmen enrolled in the courses and all those with special problems (like dyslexia) were discounted.

Of the 18 second-quarter students, seven mentioned audience as a reason for making some changes in their essays, and of the 15 first-quarter students, five mentioned the reader. I considered comments like "additional information needed here," "this sounded too boring," "a specific example

would help," "I hope this is what you want," and "I hope you don't get mad when you read this" as evidence that audience was being considered. Obviously the last two students saw the teacher as audience. Four students did not revise at all and did not consider anyone (including the teacher, I think) as likely to read their papers. One of these thought of someone proofreading, but not about someone actually caring about what she had to say. "I thought my dad might read it [for errors]," she said, "but he didn't have time." Several students said they wrote for themselves and were only concerned about getting it "right" because that's what teachers look for.

The 29 students who did revise as they wrote made most of their changes to correct spelling, punctuation, diction, and so forth. The second-quarter students made an average of 7 1/2 corrections per paper; the first-quarter students made about 2 1/4.

The second-quarter students also made more of what they considered stylistic changes to make their papers "sound better." Most of these changes, however, had nothing to do with euphony. They simply raised the level of formality by substituting more sophisticated diction and removing personal references. Some changes, attributed to sound by students were actually corrections in grammar, and some corrected mismatched clauses.

Only four of the students made organizational changes and all of these were second-quarter students. The alterations were in the order of presentation and in introductions.

One student changed his introduction because "the reader infers the organization through it, though I don't mean to imply it"; another said he had his conclusion in the introduction. Other changes involved false starts ("not what I wanted to say") and those which the student could not explain more clearly than "it seems better this way." Only one student gave the paper to someone to read after writing it. He said, "I gave the paper to my sister, and she didn't know what the hell I was talking about, so I tore it up and I'm going to try again."

Five reporters with experience ranging from 5-24 years from two local daily papers made changes while writing for quite different reasons. Robert Darton, who once wrote for the New York Times, suggested in a Daedalus article (Spring 1975) that the sociology of newswriting create an audience of peers. He suggested that journalists write for cityroom acquaintances and editors because they haven't a definite image of readers. While it is quite true that these five reporters rarely hear from readers, rarely see readership studies conducted for advertising and circulation departments, and are often concerned with what an editor will do to their stories, they used readers to justify the story they wrote and mentioned a definite audience.

A political writer said he knows from feedback that politicians read his stories and columns but he has a definite image of other readers. Though he claims not to

consciously consider audience as he writes, he refrains from sophisticated diction and long paragraphs because "this isn't the New York Times or New Republic. Our readers aren't that knowledgeable." This writer is aware that many readers have a frame of reference different from his own. For instance, when he used the term "McCarthyism" in a story, he defined it because, he said, "many readers were children or weren't born yet when Joe McCarthy was active. If I don't tell them what I mean, they may think of Eugene McCarthy instead." He, like the other four reporters, uses quotations in news stories because they "liven up a story, make it more realistic, and add authenticity."

Two news feature writers said they tried to establish transitions in the form of questions the reader would want answered. These transitions occurred in the reader's mind rather than in the story. They expected their readers to be active participants in the story, questioning and remembering earlier related stories. They looked for familiar recent events that tied to the story and suggested them so that readers could see how their particular story tied in.

The journalists also believed that the story selected a readership--that there isn't one mass, homogenous audience, but a series of fragmented ones. They thought a story should be written to appeal to as many readers as possible.

Many of the changes these reporters made were to make a sentence clearer or more concise. Roving time adverbials

that originally appeared in the middle or end of a sentence were moved up earlier to clarify the sequence of events, unless of course, the adverbial appeared in the lede sentence. In that case, the adverbial was moved to the end position. Corrections that were made had to do with clarity and journalistic convention, but the reporters said they made them for the reader. Unnecessary phrases were dropped, tag endings attributing statements to a source were added, and spellings of names were corrected. Each writer referred to readers as justification for these changes and others in syntax and diction.

In news features, these journalists found it necessary to search for an interesting lede to hook their readers. In straight news stories, they said the facts themselves would do that. One of them said about news of a possible 50-story downtown Cleveland office building: "I obviously knew from the start this would be a big-ass, front-page story, and would have considerable reader interest. This makes the writing job easier and more clear-cut, since you know that stating the bare facts in the lede will be enough to hook most readers."

Curiously, only one of the five mentioned sound. Others mentioned "flow," but were unable to explain it. The single reporter who mentioned sound had a peculiar theory about hard and soft 't' sounds. He was the only one with an English minor, and the only one with spelling and punctuation problems as well.

None of these reporters remembered learning anything specific about audience in journalism school, though two remembered learning about readability formulas. Where did their concern for audience come from? I suggest that it came from editors and peers, usually the first and most critical audience for their work. One reporter pointed out that journalism is a collaborative effort, especially now with the VDTs. A reporter can sit beside an editor while the story is being edited and can argue against or demand justification for changes. The revision process is much easier on the computer too since any part of a story can be moved about or altered without the time and agony of retyping or pencilling in corrections. The reporters implied that they learned to write for readers by having readers, not by taking classes.

Although I do not want to turn composition students into journalists, I do want them to consider audience as they write. Until we can design courses to give our students audiences besides the grader/teacher, we cannot expect them to write for others.